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## Dust Bowl, Usa: Depression America and the Ecological Imagination, 1929-1941

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—often the only cash income the Hendersons had. In the end it was always the love of the land and the hope of better times to come that kept the Hendersons going from year to year.

Turner's careful editing makes *Letters from the Dust Bowl* a recommended work for those interested in farm life during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, especially the role women played in the farm economy. It is a story of a remarkable woman whose writings add an important contribution to plains literature and history.

*Dust Bowl, USA: Depression America and the Ecological Imagination, 1929–1941*, by Brad D. Lookingbill. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001. x, 190 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index. \$44.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

Reviewer Frieda Knobloch is associate professor of American studies at the University of Wyoming. She is the author of *The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West* (1996), and *Small Worlds: A Natural History of Work in Place*, forthcoming from the University of Iowa Press in 2004.

Brad Lookingbill's *Dust Bowl, USA* turns a discursive eye on stories about the Dust Bowl, a well-known but still perhaps poorly understood chapter in American agricultural, national, and environmental history. In two ominous words, *Dust Bowl* sums up a region, a drought and blowing soil, an era, and its victims. It is a subject that has been treated by many historians, as Lookingbill knows, but "the story of the dust bowl needs retelling" (4–5) to read the cultural narratives used by people at the time, creating meanings for their predicament.

The cultural narratives Lookingbill hears in Dust Bowl stories are about the American frontier. They take essentially one form: the jeremiad, with its images of tragic decline and romantic promise. Newspaper editorials, novels, poems, songs, hymns, even federal policy documents and public addresses repeatedly cast the Dust Bowl in terms of declension and promise. American agriculture was part of the promise of the frontier, a promise abused, neglected, taken for granted, or brutally withheld by nature. Blowing dust and ruined farms were visible omens of decline, though what that decline represented remained open to furious debate. The promise could be regained, depending on the authority at hand, through socialism, the independent spirit and hard work of farmers, scientifically advanced and conservation-oriented farming, the New Deal, or possibly a reckoning with God.

This is the beauty and malleability of the jeremiad, and Lookingbill gives us a wealth of Dust Bowl stories sketching its lines and refrains. Although their interpretations of the disaster could be wildly

divergent, contemporary comments and reflections on the Dust Bowl adhered closely to the jeremiad, without ever questioning the promise of the frontier on which this particular declension sermon is based. The Dust Bowl also touched a deep chord in Americans' ecological imaginations, unfolding not just as a disaster, but as a dystopia: a cosmically ruined place, an interpretive gesture made to understand the depth of problems which had such vivid ecological effects, a gesture which in the end didn't teach us much.

Lookingbill's book is long on quoted sources and short but suggestive on analysis. It is especially interesting when he treats sources we don't see interpreted often: folk songs, or—too briefly—hymns of the era. His use of the cultural insights of Joseph Campbell and David Abrams, the clear influence of historiographer Hayden White and to some extent Michel Foucault, his assertion that this is a deconstruction of Dust Bowl narratives (it is really a gathering and reading of them), all point to other themes and preoccupations swimming somewhat below the surface of this book. The text abounds with muted allusions to his scholarly reading, and he enjoys word plays on *plot*—both stories and lands. And “the long and winding road” appears here, too, not once but twice (x, 113)—a throwaway Beatles reference that in fact intimates a different cast to the jeremiad. The book's shiny undercurrents suggest a sensibility a little at odds with what is otherwise sometimes a dry étude, so to speak, in the Dust Bowl.

*Down and Out on the Family Farm: Rural Rehabilitation in the Great Plains, 1929–1945*, by Michael Johnston Grant. Our Sustainable Future Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. x, 256 pp. Table, map, illustrations, notes, sources, index. \$39.95 paper.

Reviewer Michael W. Schuyler is emeriti professor of history at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. His research and writing have focused on agriculture and politics in the Midwest and Great Plains in the 1920s and 1930s.

Michael Johnston Grant's study of the New Deal's rural rehabilitation efforts in the Great Plains reflects the most recent trends in scholarship and is one of the best of a number of recently published books about the Great Plains experience from 1929 to 1945. Grant's study includes the states of Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota and focuses on the impact of rural rehabilitation on “borderline” farmers—those who were not desperately poor but lacked the necessary capital to increase their land holdings or to mechanize their farming operations. The author provides excellent background information about the efforts of early New Deal agencies, such as the FERA, CWA, WPA, and

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